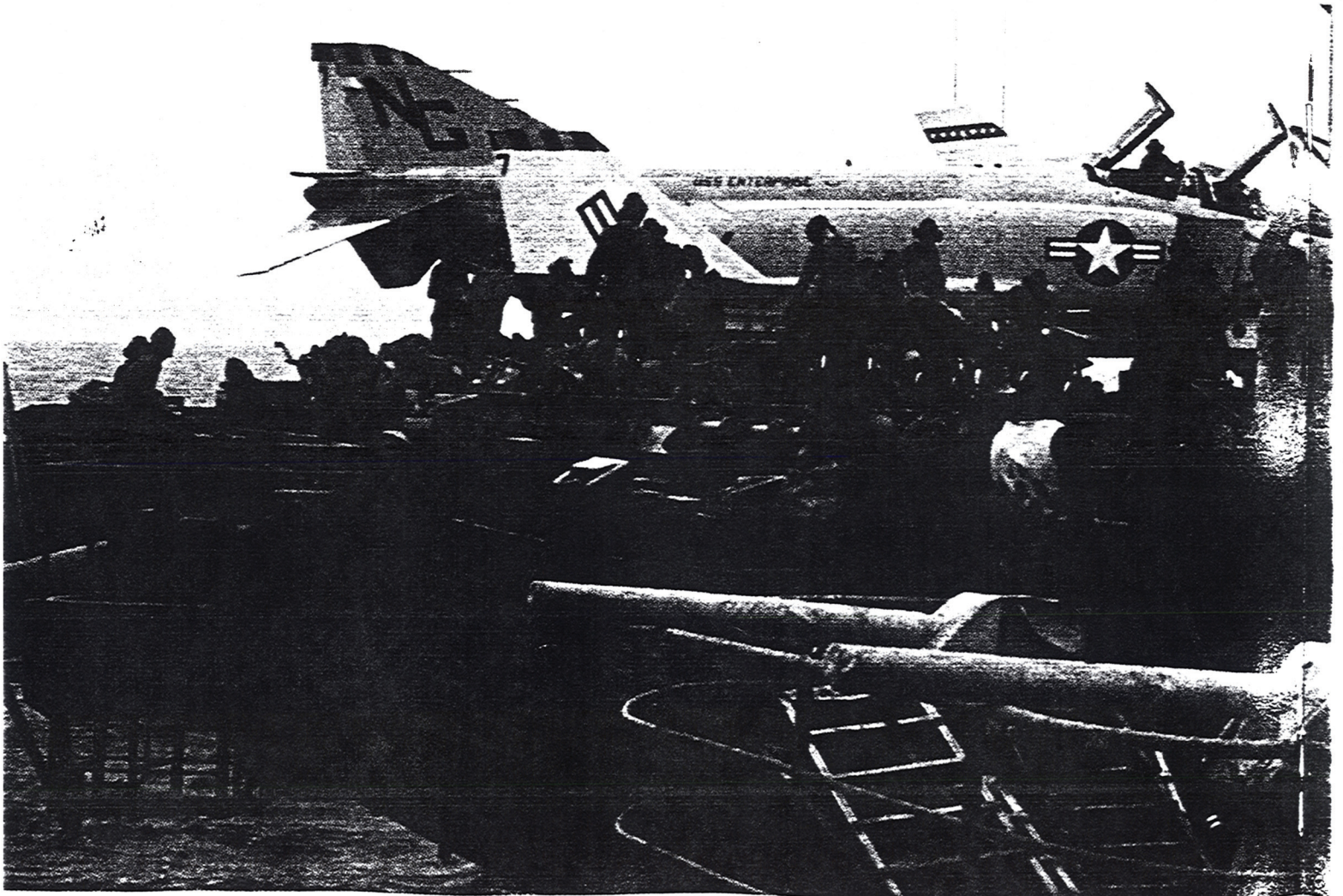


# The Big E Goes Where the Action Is

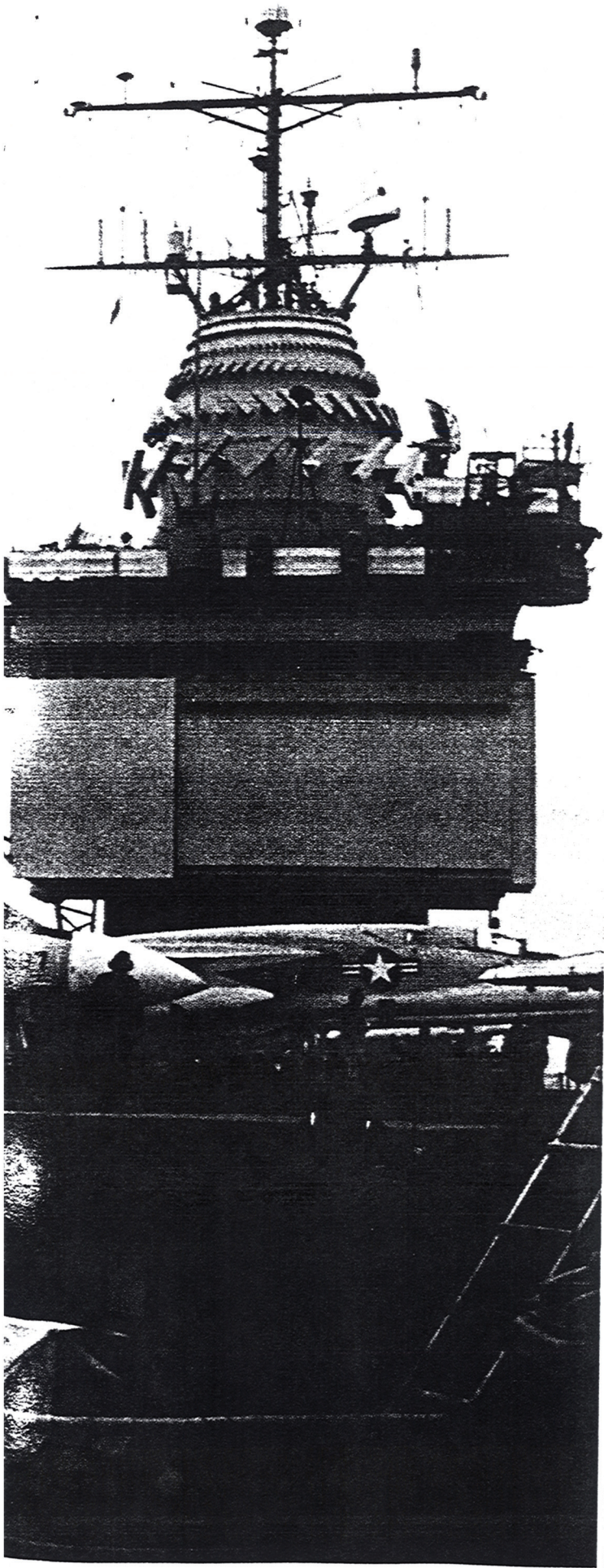
By ADMIRAL JAMES L. HOLLOWAY III, U.S. Navy (Retired)

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*What was it like to command the first combat operations involving a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier? The captain of the Enterprise—here, in the South China Sea in 1965—sees this record-setting cruise as a study in efficiency and professionalism.*







Lyndon B. Johnson was President and had begun to build his Great Society. *The Sound of Music* was leading at the movie box office, unemployment was at 4.2%, and the Dow Jones Industrial Average was at 969. The Beatles and Elvis were at the top of the pop charts. It was 1965—an apparently average year in U.S. history—but trouble loomed on the horizon.

The U.S. government had committed its support to the democracy of South Vietnam in its defense against North Vietnam, which was being armed and supported by China and the Soviet Union. The North was determined to unite all of Vietnam under its communist regime.

That summer, the USS *Enterprise* (CVAN-65) had completed her first refueling at Newport News, Virginia, and was ordered south to Guantanamo, Cuba, for an extensive shakedown. But a routine cruise to the Caribbean was not to be. The Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) decided that the *Enterprise* needed to be where the action was—for the reinforcement of Southeast Asia.

The reason for this was obvious. The *Enterprise* at that time was the largest warship afloat and ostensibly the most powerful of all time. She had eight pressurized-water nuclear reactors of 35,000 shaft horsepower each. These provided steam for four turbines driving four propellers, giving the ship a top speed of more than 35 knots. During that first refueling, nuclear cores with a three-year life span in fleet operations had been installed.

The *Enterprise* at that time was the nation's only nuclear-powered carrier. She had been commissioned in 1962, and two conventional, oil-fueled, large-deck carriers—the *America* (CVA-66) and the *John F. Kennedy* (CVA-67)—had been constructed subsequently. The Navy had asked for a nuclear-powered carrier in each case, but Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara and his systems analysis staff of “whiz kids” had rejected nuclear power as not being cost-effective. So the nuclear-powered carrier was on its way to extinction, unless someone could demonstrate that nuclear power would so improve battle effectiveness that the additional cost was justified.

As the *Enterprise* was conducting shakedown at Guantanamo Bay, the JCS order came to return to home port, load out, and proceed directly to the Gulf of Tonkin. Within 24 hours, the refresher training was terminated and the *Enterprise* was en route to Norfolk at high speed to load combat stores and ammunition and to embark an air wing, which had not even yet been organized.

The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral David L. McDonald, had determined to take advantage of the ship's unique capabilities by adding two additional squadrons of attack aircraft from the West Coast, where they were available, to the large-deck carrier's normal air wing complement.



The *Enterprise's* ability to operate the additional aircraft was not so much because of the size of her flight deck, which was not appreciably larger than those of her conventional sister ships. Instead, the most important factor was her enormously increased capacity for aviation fuel and ammunition. Without the need to carry black oil for her own propulsion, she could carry 90% more jet propulsion fuel and 50% more aviation ordnance than could the largest conventional carriers.

Carrier Air Wing Nine, as the reinforced group was designated, consisted of two squadrons of F-4 Phantom IIs, the most advanced and capable tactical aircraft in the world at that time. Originally designed and produced by the Navy as its standard fighter, the Phantom II's performance was so marked that the Air Force, NATO, and eventually all Free World forces adopted it as their standard tactical fighter. With a ceiling of more than 45,000 feet and a maximum speed of Mach 2, the F-4 could outperform any other fighter in any air force.

Adding to the complement were four squadrons of A-4 Skyhawks, relatively small and simple attack bombers capable of nuclear as well as conventional weapon delivery. The aircraft's utility for a carrier deck lay not only in its small size but also in its large load-carrying capability. Empty, the Skyhawk weighed less than 9,000 pounds, but fully loaded with bombs and fuel on the catapult, it grossed more than 26,000 pounds. Because of its simplicity and performance, the A-4 was also a favorite of U.S. allies.

Also included in the air wing was one squadron of RA-5C Vigilante reconnaissance aircraft, a detachment of radar surveillance aircraft, two detachments of A-3 Skywarriors, and a detachment of rescue helicopters.

After a week in Norfolk embarking aircraft, personnel, and support equipment of the air wing, the *Enterprise* got under way on 26 October 1965, bound for Puerto Rico and two days of simulated Vietnam strike operations, using live ordnance against Vieques Island. This was the first time the *Enterprise* and her aircraft had operated together. Remarkably, they both received an overall grade of excellent. Then, without a port visit, the ship's bow swung southeast and headed for the Cape of Good Hope, the Indian Ocean, and the South China Sea.

The first task was to top off the combat consumables, jet fuel, and ammunition. The carrier spent the entire first

night alongside the oiler *Sabine* (AO-25) and an ammo ship, the *Shasta* (AE-33), from which more than 400 tons of bombs and missiles were loaded.

With the nuclear-powered frigate *Bainbridge* (DLGN-25) in company, the *Enterprise* broke away, ringing up 28 knots. The combat deployment of the first nuclear-powered carrier battle group had begun.

Steaming at 28 to 30 knots across the Atlantic and Indian Oceans, the carrier conducted full-scale flight operations for nine days of the three-week transit. Officers on board the *Enterprise* had been told that she would be

committed to combat immediately upon arrival in the Gulf of Tonkin. No warm-up period would be possible, so these flight operations were vital.

In fact, not until reaching the Strait of Malacca was the ship able to handle a flight deck packed with 90 airplanes. And not until the last day of the transit were the problems finally solved. We had to come up with new techniques and procedures never used before on carrier flight decks.

When the *Enterprise* reached the Strait of Malacca, her tanks were low on aviation fuel because of the extensive flight operations. A U.S. Navy oiler was waiting on the approaches. At 1900 that day, the *Enterprise* hooked up to the USS *Navassa* (AO-106) and remained alongside for 11 hours, taking on 1.3

million gallons of jet fuel, as the tanker negotiated the narrow strait.

The following day, the *Enterprise* turned north to head for Vietnam at 30 knots. That morning a transport aircraft landed with members of the staff of Task Force 77 to brief on operations in Vietnam. The *Enterprise* was to commence combat operations immediately.

Although the air wing components were new to each other and to the ship, and the *Enterprise* had never completed her shakedown, no one questioned that they would be ready. The training and work-up, though, had not been easy. More than 6,250 people were in the crew, and the average age was under 19. Most were on their first cruise. The brief time to prepare for the transfer from the Atlantic Fleet to the Pacific Fleet, the additional two squadrons in the wing, the special considerations of nuclear power, and the immediate requirement to handle maximum loads of live ammunition all added to the dimensions of the readiness task.



*Upon his return from a sortie, Commander Jim Shipman (right), Air Wing Nine commander, briefs Captain Holloway on the flight deck of the Enterprise. The carrier executed some 16,000 sorties during her 1965-66 deployment to Vietnam.*

. . . . .



The executive officer was Commander Forrest Peterson, a former test pilot who had qualified as an astronaut and had commanded a fighter squadron before coming to the *Enterprise*. He had taken Admiral Hyman Rickover's course, which was the equivalent of a master's degree in nuclear reactor design engineering, but he could be as tough as a boatswain's mate when he had to be.

All of the squadron leaders were veterans of previous combat tours in either Korea or Vietnam. These were the hearts and minds of our fighting capability, our combat leaders. Either the commanding officer or executive officer of the squadron led virtually every combat flight. The leader was the first in on the attack and the last to leave the target area. The professional and courageous leadership of these strike leaders in Vietnam was legendary. But the Navy paid dearly for it: 67 air wing commanders, squadron commanders, and executive officers were lost in combat during that war.

At 0800 on 2 December 1965, the first combat sorties from a nuclear-powered ship launched in support of U.S. ground forces engaged with the enemy in South Vietnam.

The pace that first day was hectic. The flight-deck crews had to grow accustomed to the more delicate handling of live weapons in great quantities, and the operations were not always of textbook quality. But 12 hours later, at the end of the flying day, the *Enterprise* had carried out her full flight schedule without missing a sortie. With this success came a down side, too. One A-4 had been shot down and the pilot lost, and an F-4 had crashed into the sea during its landing approach.

The next day, with the pilots and flight-deck crews feeling more like veterans, flight operations smoothed out. When the last sortie had been recovered 12 hours later, the embarked carrier division staff reported that the *Enterprise* had set new records for numbers of sorties launched in combat from a carrier in a single day—with no losses.

Several days later, during a major air effort in support of an Army Green Beret unit beleaguered in a jungle outpost, the *Enterprise* topped her earlier performance. The following message from the Task Force Commander, CTF-77, to Commander Seventh Fleet tells the story: "I am pleased to advise that pilots of Air Wing Nine, operating from USS *Enterprise*, set a new one-day record for strike sorties flown. One Hundred Sixty-Five strike sorties were flown today. This number is 34 greater than the record prior to Big E's arrival on Dixie Station." The *Enterprise* had flown 211 sorties that day, 177 of which were classified as combat sorties, including the 165 strike sorties.

After a week of operations into South Vietnam, Commander Seventh Fleet ordered the ship to move north to Yankee Station, where she was to conduct special operations. The term Yankee Station was the reference

point in the northern Gulf of Tonkin where strikes into North Vietnam originated. Special operations was the code name for strikes against well-defended and important targets near Hanoi, Haiphong, and other strategic areas, all heavily guarded by Soviet missiles and Russian MiG aircraft.

Task Force 77 maintained a minimum of three carriers operating from Yankee Station and sometimes as many as five. This carrier force conducted strike operations 24 hours a day, regardless of the weather. One carrier flew from 0000 to 1200, another from 0800 to 2000, and a third from 1200 until 2400. This way, targets were covered around the clock with the full weight of two carriers during the daylight hours, when our attacks were the most effective.

Every five days the carriers' flying periods rotated so that in 30 days on the line, each carrier had an equal share of night flying, which was hardest on the pilots.

When the 12-hour flying period was over, however, the work was not done. At that time the carriers replenished their fuel, ammunition, and stores.

When the last plane in the day's air plan had touched down, the *Enterprise* immediately swung out of the wind and headed for an underway replenishment group (URG) at 30 knots. The URG consisted of three or more support ships: an oiler, an ammo ship, and a general stores vessel, steaming in a line abreast formation.

Usually these ships were about ten nautical miles away, struggling at their maximum speed of 18 knots to keep up with the carrier group. The *Enterprise* would head for a spot 2,000 yards abeam of the URG formation, ending up on an opposite course at 25 knots. When abeam of the replenishment ship, the carrier commenced a 180° turn, maintaining 25 knots and ending up 800 yards astern. The carrier overtook the oiler, sliding up the port side about 70 feet abeam. When the *Enterprise's* bow crossed the stern of the oiler her engines were reversed, and when the carrier was positioned properly, bridge to bridge, turns for 18 knots ahead were rung up, and the ships remained in position 70 feet apart. Lines were then passed over during the final approach, followed by hoses or transfer lines, and the hookup was made. The criterion was to start pumping jet fuel or for the first load of ammo to come across not more than three minutes after the bow had crossed the stern. Efficiency was critical to limit the carrier's time alongside, and careful records were kept of times and quantities.

In February 1966, during a routine, post-flying, day replenishment operation, the *Enterprise* took aviation fuel and ammunition from the USS *Sacramento* (AOE-1), the first of a new class of fast combat-support ships that carried both of these combat consumables. The *Enterprise's* performance this day elicited the following message from the *Sacramento*: "Yesterday's ammo transfer totaled 654 short



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tons. Of this total, 196 short tons were transferred by Vertrep. This is a new record for us for a single day's work and I believe it is a record for any replenishment ship." The commanding officer of *Sacramento* was Captain Harold Shear, later to be Vice Chief of Naval Operations.

This level of proficiency became the norm in the *Enterprise*. The *Sacramento* later sent the following message to Commander Seventh Fleet:

The Navy's first fast combat support ship, USS *Sacramento* (AOE-1), set a replenishment at sea transfer first while operating off the Vietnam coast with the attack carrier USS *Enterprise* on 2 June in the South China Sea. The nuclear powered *Enterprise* eased alongside *Sacramento*, rigged four transfer stations and began to receive the first of a total of 241.1 short tons of vital conventional ordnance items. The *Sacramento's* two Boeing UH4G-A helicopters were aloft to transfer simultaneously with the alongside stations, and they "bombarded" the flight deck elevator of the attack carrier with palletized ordnance until the completion of all deliveries. The total transfer evolution required 55 minutes, yielding a total transfer record of 258.9 short tons per hour. This is the highest transfer rate recorded for *Sacramento* to date, and is believed to be an all time high for sustained replenishment of a significant quantity of ammunition.

Each carrier conducted replenishment operations almost every day, and it took four to six hours. It was a matter of policy that all ships remain topped off in all categories to be prepared to respond immediately to any new crisis without having to take time to load out.

Two-thirds of all replenishments were done at night under "darken ship" conditions, with carriers, URGs, destroyers, and Russian spy ships all over the place, on different courses and at varying speeds.

The carriers, cruisers, and destroyers of the Seventh Fleet received all of their resupply at sea over the entire period of a six- to nine-month deployment to Vietnam. Up to 99% of all logistics were transferred ship-to-ship under way. Time in port was devoted entirely to repairs and rest and relaxation.

The reason for this was a good one. Navy support ships picked up their cargo from depots on the West Coast of the United States or in Hawaii and proceeded directly to the Gulf of Tonkin. When their cargo loads ran low, the ships that had been forward longest transferred their cargo to other support ships to consolidate and then steamed back east for another load.

This system saved the time-consuming and expensive process required by the Air Force and Army in which cargo would be shipped from the United States to a far-eastern port, off-loaded, trucked to a depot, then trucked to the operating base for distribution to individual units.

This tempo of operations—12 hours flying, 4 to 6 hours replenishing, and 6 hours getting ready for the next flying day—went on for 30 days without a day off.

On the 31st day, the *Enterprise* would leave the Gulf of Tonkin and proceed to port for six days. This was usually at Subic Bay in the Philippines. Once during each cruise, the carriers were sent to Hong Kong as a special treat. There, the crew of the *Enterprise* was again "mentioned in dispatches" for its exemplary conduct ashore on liberty.

The *Enterprise* completed five of these 30-day line periods in her 1965-66 deployment, returning to San Francisco, her new Pacific Fleet home



port, in July 1966. At that time the public had not yet turned cynical of the war in Vietnam, and the *Enterprise* received a hero's welcome, according to a cover story in *Life* magazine. A throng of 8,000 people crowded the Golden Gate Bridge and stopped traffic for five hours to see the first nuclear-powered carrier and the world's largest warship return from her first combat cruise. San Francisco newspaper headlines were calling it VJ Day all over again. The Mayor of San Francisco declared an "Enterprise Day," and not many sailors with *Enterprise* patches on their uniforms were allowed to pay for a drink in the San Francisco bars that evening.

What had been accomplished during this cruise? The *Enterprise* flew about 16,000 sorties; dropped about 14,000 tons of bombs; took 25 million gallons of jet fuel from fleet oilers; and loaded 12,000 tons of bombs from ammo ships. In the process, she lost 20 planes with 18 pilots and crewmen, including a squadron commander and an executive officer.

To the great personal satisfaction of the crew, the *Enterprise*, in spite of her interfleet transfer and compressed training, won the Battle Efficiency Award—the coveted "E"—for carriers in the Pacific Fleet during this deployment. She also won four of the six departmental awards, in operations, communication, engineering, and weapons. Following this was a Navy Unit Commendation from the Secretary of the Navy to the *Enterprise* and Air Wing Nine for exceptionally meritorious service in combat during the period from December 1966 to June 1967.

The *Enterprise* made a substantial contribution to the air campaign in North Vietnam, where the Navy, over the period of the war, flew half of the combat sorties into that sector. The unrestricted ten-day air campaign against Hanoi in 1972 was what finally brought the North Vietnamese to the peace table.

The most important long-term contribution made by this cruise was that it sold Congress and the Department of Defense on nuclear power for carriers. After this deployment, Secretary McNamara changed his mind, and in 1966 approved the construction of CVN-67, the *Nimitz*, for the fiscal year 1967 shipbuilding program.

Today, the Navy has eight *Nimitz*-class carriers in the fleet or under construction. No other non-nuclear-powered carrier ever has been approved by Congress.

A message from Commander Seventh Fleet, Vice Admiral J. J. Hyland, well summarizes the performance of the *Enterprise*:

Well Done. I am very favorably impressed with the Big "E's" performance in your first tour on the line. Your effort of over 100 sorties on 26 April, 104 of which were attack sorties in North Vietnam, obviously represents the result of training, hard work, superior planning and Esprit. This record is far less a tribute to the advantages of nuclear power than to the organic fueled people serving in this fine ship.

Only in the U.S. Navy could 5,000 average American 18-year-olds come on board the largest and most complex ship in history—with 8 nuclear reactors and 98 of the world's most advanced aircraft—and in six months set records for combat operations that still stand. ⚓

Admiral Holloway's U.S. Navy career included service as Chief of Naval Operations, Vice Chief of Naval Operations, Commander Seventh Fleet, Deputy Commander-in-Chief Atlantic, Commander Striking Forces Sixth Fleet, and Director Strike Warfare. He commanded the USS *Enterprise*, a seaplane tender, and an A-4 squadron after two tours in Korea, flying Grumman Panthers. Admiral Holloway also served in combat in destroyers during World War II in both the Atlantic and Pacific theaters. He graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1942.

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